

Montgomery Block
618 Montgomery Street
South San Francisco, California

H.A.B.S.
Cal 1228

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Western Office, Division of Design and Construction
1000 Geary Street
San Francisco, California

PHOTOGRAPH - DATA BOOK REPORT
HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDING SURVEY

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MONTGOMERY BLOCK
(Office Building)

ADDRESS 628 Montgomery Street, San Francisco,
San Francisco County, California

OWNER S. E. Onorato, Mills Building, San Francisco

OCCUPANT Various - Tenant

USE Commercial Building

ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Built as the largest and safest office building in San Francisco, the Montgomery Block became the headquarters of professional men from 1853 to 1890. It housed the Adolph Sutro Library and at the turn of the century became the domicile of such artists and writers as the Norrises, George Sterling, Maynard Dixon, Ralph Stackpole, Charles Caldwell Dobie and Jack London. It was the only major downtown San Francisco building to escape the earthquake and fire of 1906.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Physical History The Montgomery block was conceived by Henry Wager Halleck as an answer to the series of major fire disasters suffered by San Francisco in the early 1850's. He and his law partners, Archibald Carey Peachy, Frederick Billings and later Trenor W. Park, with the aid of outside investors, constructed the "Washington Block" as it was first known. This fire and earthquake proof structure was completed in December of 1853, having been under construction for fourteen months. The architect was the English-trained Gordon Parker Cummings, whose newspaper description of the building transcribed below is the best physical description of the building known. The original design was no doubt influenced greatly by Halleck, who was trained as a civil engineer in military fortifications at West Point. The provision of diagonal iron ties as resistance for earthquake torque is notable, the use of other horizontal iron truss rods more common. Halleck, who was later to become General-in-Chief of

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the Union armies was an able administrator but not a brilliant field tactician which led to his appointment as Chief of Staff with Ulysses Grant filling his vacated position. His duties as an inspector of military construction no doubt account for some of the fortress-like quality of the building and the contemporary appellation of "Halleck's Floating Fortress". The eastern side of Montgomery Street was covered by waters of the San Francisco Bay as late as 1849. Halleck's service with the army brought him to California at the outbreak of the Mexican War and he served as Secretary of State for the Territory of California under the United States military government. After the adoption of the state constitution, which he helped frame, he joined with Peachy and Billings in the practice of law. To prepare himself in this new professional field he amassed a library of books and legal documents pertaining mainly to mining claims and his concern for these valuable papers were no doubt a factor in his desire to construct a fireproof building in which to house them.

The building though it remains the same physical size and shape has undergone many tenant changes and remodelings. The present elevator equipment installed in 1918 replaced earlier equipment. Probably before 1900 the building of the elevator shaft and consequent main stair remodeling was accomplished. The wrought iron balcony at the second floor level on the Montgomery Street elevation was removed, according to one report, during President Grant's administration which would give it at most only a life span of twenty-five years.

The earliest known photographic record of San Francisco, the Phelan collection of Fardon photographs which is in the Bancroft Library, University of California, shows this balcony in the photograph reproduced as the first photograph in this series.

Historical Events The Montgomery Block, being the largest and best equipped commercial building in San Francisco of 1860 became the center of much of the commercial life of the city. Prominent law firms involved in the numerous California land cases prepared their briefs in the offices they maintained there. Mining engineers opened their doors upstairs while the Adams Express Company which occupied the first story Merchant Street wing acted as bank and mint of much of the gold brought to San Francisco from the Sierra foothills. The walls of the vault and the smelter oven remain evident in the construction. Kilduff and Meiggs operated a saloon, the Bank Exchange, in the first story Washington

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wing of the building. This was connected by a stairway (later removed) with the second floor billiard room and lobby. This lobby was the scene of many a commercial transaction of the San Francisco business community. The Bank Exchange existed until prohibition, operated, for the greater part of its years, by Duncan Nicol creator of San Francisco's legendary "Pisco Punch" which was served on the premises.

Various San Francisco newspapers had at one time editorial offices in the building, including the Evening Bulletin, whose crusading editor James King of William was shot and killed on Montgomery Street in 1856. This incident precipitated the second Vigilance Committee and the Montgomery Block acted as a secondary headquarters for this group.

Bret Harte, Samuel Clemens and later Frank and Kathleen Norris and Jack London are some of the literary names associated with or domiciled as tenants of the building when it passed from being the stronghold of lawyers and mining engineers to become the center of San Francisco's bohemian culture.

One engineer, turned philanthropist, Adolph Sutro, effected one of the major remodelings of the building. Around 1880 he converted the second story billiard lounge and the space of the third story corresponding above to a two storied galleried library to house the Sutro collection of early manuscripts and rare books. The portion of this library to survive the San Francisco fire of 1906 is that portion not removed from the building during the holocaust. Halleck's fortress building and favorable winds were the contributing factors in saving this one downtown structure from the fire which gutted all the other structures in this area. After the fire this space was reconverted to offices on each floor.

One of the last surviving law firms in the building was that of Oliver Perry Stidger, prominent in the affairs of San Francisco's Chinese community and confidant of Sun-Yat-Sen secretary to Wong Sam Ark. These men availed themselves of Stidger's talents to draft the proclamation of the Republic of China.

While many prominent names of San Francisco are connected with the building, few other than those mentioned have had anything to do with the physical character of the building. Sometime after the fire of 1906 all of the plaster moldings and sculpture was removed from the Montgomery Street

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facade and the first story shops opened up with large areas of glass leaving only the Merchant Street elevation with the architectural character of the 1853 structure.

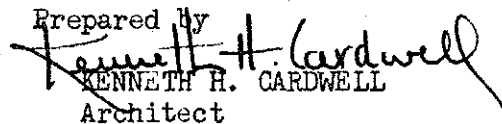
Supplemental Materials

Idwal Jones, Ark of Empire, Doubleday and Co.
New York, 1951

A historical novel of the personalities connected with the building.

Historic American Building Inventory - Jan. 15, 1958
California State Historical Landmark No. 80

Prepared by


KENNETH H. CARDWELL
Architect

August 1958

ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

General The most informative article on the architectural characteristics of the building is contained in a newspaper article published in the December 23, 1853 issue of the Daily Herald of San Francisco and herewith is quoted in its entirety.

An Ornament to the City

We have been furnished by Mr. Cummings, the Architect, with the following description of the new building of Messrs. Halleck, Peachy, Billings & Park, which is so great an ornament to our city as to have attracted universal admiration. The spacious edifice, just approaching completion, is in extent, permanency of construction, and architectural beauty, one that would claim more than ordinary attention in any part of the world. The building occupies the entire space of the square, between Merchant and Washington street, extending one hundred and twenty-two feet on Montgomery street, and one hundred and thirty-eight feet on Washington street, and the same on Merchant street, thereby presenting an unbroken facade of four hundred feet; and the four stories of windows above the basement, which are large and airy, rise over the principal one in diminished and graceful proportion, with architraves, cornice, etc., to the frieze course of the building, which is marked by horizontal moulding and a beautiful frieze band, or vetruvian

scroll, over which rises an elegant cornice of egg moulds, modillions, corona, etc., the whole terminating with an appropriate blocking course. The principal floor is particularized by its support of pilasters with carved caps, the flat segmental arches of each opening, and their rustic indentations, giving at once an appearance of strength and lightness, are ornamented by a keystone bearing sculptured heads in semi-relievo, all the work of California artists, containing, among many fancy heads, the truthful portraits, of Washington, Jackson, Clay, Franklin, Gen. Montgomery, the late Collector, and the late Mayor, B. C. Sanders, and C. J. Brenham, Esqrs., the architect, sculptor, and builder. A wide moulded belt-course rises to the second-story windows, which are to be surmounted, the entire lengths of all the fronts, by a neat balustrade, which will mark the line of demarkation of this story, and fix its height. There are side entrances on Washington and Merchant streets, communicating with the spacious halls that intersect the building longitudinally, in its several wings, the main entrance to which is in the centre of the Montgomery street front, under an elegant doorway of cut stone. This is the chef d'oeuvre of the whole edifice. The columns, in alto-relievo, are of the Roman Doric, from the style of the Dioclesian baths, at Rome. The frieze is beautifully sculptured, and the sunk corona exhibits all the rich ornaments of tympanum, with its mutules, mouldings, etc., the bronze iron doors being surmounted by the head of Washington. A spacious stairway leads to the second story, and the wing stairs in the halls, lead continuously to the third and fourth stories. All the exterior offices, on each street, are lighted from the street, and the interior ones are almost as effectually lighted from a spacious court, that occupies the centre. Passages from the rear of each of the halls lead to the closets, etc. This arrangement is observed in each story but the second, one part of which is occupied by Messrs. Kilduff & Meiggs, with the store below it, as a billiard room, and presents a spacious area eighty by fifty-three feet, both of which are tastefully painted in fresco. Besides the twenty-eight basement and first-story stores, the building contains nearly one hundred and fifty offices on its several floors, all of which are furnished with gas, grates, etc; and by judicious and skillful engineering, with water in every hall, from an artesian well in the court. The gas is made in the basement, and by an economical use of room, the gasometer and reservoir occupy but one and the same space on the roof, all the water from which is conducted unseen, as also the entire drainage of the court, through a brick drain into Washington street. All the interior and exterior openings are provided with substantial iron shutters, manufactured by

Mr. Thomas Shaw. The brick walls have been substantially built on piles, carefully anchored and tied. All the exterior openings are furnished with mahogany doors, and shutters, and the rooms grained in oak, by Mr. Kellan. The master bricklayers are Messrs. Cook & Coffin: carpenters, Laroache, King & Chittenden; stone mason and sculptor, James Sheldon, Esq. The interior plastering has been done by Messrs. Strong, the outside by Vandyke & Kennedy. The roof is covered with Purkitt's patent cement. The architect, builder and director is G. P. Cummings, Esq., builder of the Union Hotel, and other fine buildings. The whole edifice is a chaste and beautiful piece of Italian architecture, with few rivals in any country, and will be a lasting monument to the enterprise and public spirit of its owners, Messrs. Halleck, Peachy, Billings & Park.

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Mr. Cumming's statement stands true for the structure as it is viewed today, allowing for the changes stated above and the general deterioration of the fabric that one hundred years of use will inflict. The iron shutters have been removed. Pine floors have been re-laid on sleepers over the original surface. The horizontal framing members available for inspection are three by twelve inches rough redwood and though the original roof has been replaced the ceiling joists of the fourth floor are also redwood.

The stone used for the sills and keystone sculptures is a local micaceous sandstone, graywacke, of poor building quality, ochre in hue. The exterior plaster was originally an earth pink. The base course of the building is a grey granite as were probably the entrance details described by Cummings. All the exterior window molds, except the sills, were executed in plaster. The bricks of the bearings walls seem to be a fairly soft burned brick which would lead one to believe that though they are reputed to have been shipped to the area from eastern ports, they may have been obtained from local San Francisco Bay sources. Announcements of the availability of such material appear in the journals published in the city while the building was under construction.

The main block fronting on Montgomery street has settled from the two wings, creating visible cracks in the north and south elevations. The basement stores have all been abandoned as stores and are used for storage by connections with the shops above. Subsequent raising of sidewalk and street levels having made them untenable. Many of the offices and shops remain vacant in an area which has passed a low

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economic ebb and is rapidly becoming the center of the San Francisco wholesale furniture importers and distributors. Plans are underway to replace the building with a parking structure by the close of 1959.

Prepared by
Kenneth H. Cardwell
KENNETH H. CARDWELL
Architect

August 1958